Does It Trouble Your Mind (The Way You Trouble Mine) by bigbidumbass

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Genre: Alternate Universe - No Pennywise (IT), Eddie Kaspbrak Loves Richie Tozier, First Kiss, Internalized Homophobia, LGBTQ Character, M/M, Reddie, Richie Tozier Loves Eddie Kaspbrak, Teenage Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Truth or Dare, dumb boys being disasters!!, from ages 12-18 basically, pretty much fluff, takes place at 3 different age periods, that clown bitch is not here
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Summary:

A fic started from the idea of Eddie being dared to kiss Richie, but evolved.
Basically, Richie and Eddie are disasters.

The three main chapters time skip through different ages.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Twelve years old.

Richie wasn't gay. He couldn't be, right? Being gay was wrong. Wrong and disgusting and shameful.

And he'd heard people talk about 'the queers' under his breath enough to get the picture.

So then... what the fuck was he feeling? And when would it stop? For the past few months, his brain had kept coming up with words to describe it, but they were wrong, all wrong. *You have a crush,* his mind hissed to him, a thought he constantly rejected.

No, he always thought, *because if I had a crush on a boy then I'd be gay, and I'm not gay.*

Today was no different than all the others he'd experienced recently. He held his breath as the word ran through his mind- *crush*- and combatted it with two words of his own- *not gay.*

They seemed to rattle around in his brain, echoing endlessly. He chanted along silently with the sound of it: *not gay not gay not gay not gay not gay not gay not gay-*

"Richie?" Bev asked, taking him out of his thoughts, "You okay?"

Shit, he thought, realizing he'd been sitting there the entire time, spacing out while the rest of the group had been playing truth or dare.

"I'm fine," he breathed anxiously, hoping the group couldn't read what he was thinking.

"Are you sure?" Eddie asked. Richie tried not to look at him, tried not to notice the way the sun was hitting his eyes-

Richie's heart pounded in his chest. *Not gay not gay not gay not gay*

not gay!

“ Yeah, I'm just thinking about how I fucked your mom last night,” he teased, hoping it came out more naturally than he felt.

“That’s not fucking funny,” Eddie replied angrily, and Richie felt the air relax, letting his panicked thoughts slip to the back of his mind. *Just act natural,* he told himself. *Deal with it later.*

There was a moment of silence as the group stared at him, and Richie stared back.

“What?” he asked.

“I-It’s your turn,” Bill told him.

“Huh?” Richie asked, then remembered that he was playing the game too. “Oh, shit. Who’s asking me truth or dare?”

“No, dumbass, your turn to ask!” Stan huffed exasperatedly.

“Okay then, Urine, truth or dare!” he said as he pointed at Stan, who rolled his eyes at the nickname.

“ *Uris,”* Stanley snapped at him, “and truth.”

Richie grinned, falling on a basic question: “Have you ever peed your pants?” he asked, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

As Richie’s words hit the room, Stan’s cheeks went a little pink, but he just shrugged.

“I mean, yeah, haven’t we all?” he asked. There was a brief silence as everyone nodded agreement.

“Whatever,” Richie said, leaning into the center of the group to grab the bottle, spinning it to determine who asked next. It landed on Mike, who contemplated for a moment before looking at Bill. “Truth or dare?” he asked

Bill swallowed hard. “Truth,” he answered.

“Do you still sleep with a stuffed animal?” Mike asked readily.

Bill went a little pale, obviously embarrassed. “Yeah, I-I do,” he admitted softly.

Richie, of course, jumped at this opportunity. “HA! BILL-!” he started, but was rudely interrupted by a blanket Bev had tossed at his face.

“Leave him alone, Rich,” she said. “I bet most of us still do that, including you!”

Richie opened his mouth to argue but was silenced by her stare.

“Everyone’s choosing truth,” Ben pointed out. “It’s truth or *dare* .”

“Hey, you chose truth too,” Bill reminded him.

“It’s truth or dare, you should be able to choose what you want,” Stan added.

“Guys, come on,” Bev said, shaking her head. “People can choose either one.”

As they bickered, Richie noticed a worm on the ground, slowly inching its way through the dirt.

“Hey, look!” he said, picking it up. “A worm!”

Eddie wrinkled his nose at the sight.

“Gross, put it back,” he whined, and Richie felt a jolt through his stomach when Eddie’s gaze met his own.

While Richie was deathly afraid of that feeling, there was a part of him that so badly craved more, so Richie instead leaned towards Eddie and taunted him further.

“What, *Eddie Spaghetti* , afraid of a little worm?” he teased, dangling it towards him.

Eddie scrambled back away from it. “Okay, first of all- don’t fucking call me that; second of all, get it away from me, asshat!”

“Richie, put it back,” Bev said, a twinge of annoyance in her voice.

Richie reluctantly obeyed, placing the worm gently back into the soft dirt.

“Gross,” Eddie whispered, shaking his head. God, he was-

Shut up, Richie stopped himself. *Not gay not gay not gay not gay not gay.*

He watched as Bill spun the bottle, it slowly landing on Beverly.

She looked around, a hint of malice in her eyes as she picked her target.

“Richie,” she finally said, a hint of a smirk gracing her lips, “Truth or dare?

“Dare,” he said automatically.

“Every time,” Mike sighed, and Bill gave a soft chuckle.

Bev smirked at Richie, obviously having anticipated his answer. “Okay trashmouth, I dare you... to eat a worm.”

As her words processed through the group, there was a cacophony of reactions.

“No, no way,” Mike yelled, his voice barely audible through Stan’s protestation of “Please don’t,” Eddie’s cry of protest and then use of his inhaler, and Ben’s “That’s disgusting!”

Richie grinned confidently. “Dare accepted!” he yelled in a poor attempt at a British accent.

“Okay, no, if he’s eating a worm, we have to find one that’s already dead,” Mike insisted.

“Yeah, nothing alive should ever have to experience being put into Richie’s mouth,” Stan agreed

In response, Rich chucked a twig at him, which Stanley easily

dodged.

“Guys, look f-for a dead worm,” Bill said, and everyone but Eddie (who shook his head vigorously) got up to do so.

“Found one,” Ben called a second later, holding it up.

“Yes!” Richie cheered. Ben carefully handed it to him.

Eddie gagged and used his inhaler, turning away so he wouldn’t see.

“This is disgusting,” Stan said.

Richie shrugged and popped the worm into his mouth, swallowing it whole. “Needs some garlic,” he remarked.

Half of the group laughed; the other half made a disgusted noise.

Eddie was still facing away, making a repulsed face.

“ *Eddie bear* , the worm is gone!” Richie called. Eddie shook his head, breathing into his inhaler again.

“Maybe we should call it a day,” Bev suggested. “I mean, no one’s going to top that. Plus, it’s getting late and we have homework.”

The boys groaned. Mike nodded and started packing up, and the other boys followed.

Richie felt more and more panic as the group slowly started leaving.

“Bye guys,” Stan called, climbing out of the clubhouse.

Richie glanced over at Eddie, who had put away his things and was brushing the dirt off his legs.

“Bye Richie,” Eddie told him softly.

“Bye,” Richie managed. *Not gay not gay not gay not gay,* he thought, watching him crawl up the ladder. Then Eddie was gone.

Richie awkwardly realized that it was now him and Bev, and neither of them had made any attempt to leave.

“What is it?” Bev asked him abruptly.

“What?” Richie replied, flustered.

“Something’s on your mind. I can tell. What is it?” she probed softly.

“It’s nothing. It doesn’t matter,” he replied. His hands were shaking.

When his answer was met with silence, he turned to look at her. She was staring at him, a hint of a smile on her lips.

Richie took a shaky breath in, then slowly exhaled. *Fine,* he thought.

“What is having a crush like?” he asked. “What’s it feel like?”

Bev raised an eyebrow, looking as if this was the last thing she’d expected him to say.

Richie honestly did not know why he’d asked. Maybe a part of him was desperately hoping that he was wrong about what he felt, that the feelings he was trying so hard to suppress inside him were… well, normal. *Straight* . That the phrase he found himself constantly chanting- *not gay not gay not gay not gay* - was actually true.

Bev shifted a little, looking partially bemused but also a little sad.

“It’s hard to explain, I guess,” she started, giving a small shrug. “You just... want to be with someone. I mean, there’s all the typical stuff- butterflies in your stomach, heart beating fast, stuff like that, but… I don’t know, you just like being around them. You want to be around them all the time. And it’s also scary, in a way, when you don’t know if they like you back.”

Richie’s heart sank. Well, there was no more denial. What Bev described was definitely what he was feeling. He felt numb. His body was trembling.

The voice that had been so adamant about being *not gay* now hissed to him the opposite- *gay gay gay gay, you’re gay and you have a crush on Eddie!*

Fuck.

Bev was staring at him again. When he met her eyes, she grinned.

“Why? You have a crush on someone, Tozier?” she asked.

Richie didn’t feel up to joking around with Bev. He just silently nodded, grabbing a handful of dirt and letting it slip from his fingers.

“Who? Greta?” she asked, a hint of teasing in her voice.

Richie made a face. “You’re fucking kidding, right? *Her*?!” he asked incredulously.

Bev shrugged, laughing, then slowly grew silent. “You don’t have to tell me, you know,” she said, and Richie nodded.

He felt as though he were suffocating, trying to decide whether or not to tell her, whether it would change how she saw him, whether she’d ever want to see him again.

“It’s Eddie,” he finally blurted.

Richie had thought maybe he’d feel better, getting it out, but instead, he just felt terrified. It was hard to breathe. His head was spinning- he thought he might throw up. Desperately, he planted his fingers into the dirt, hoping it would somehow stabilize him.

“Oh, Richie,” she said softly, and before he knew it he was wrapped in her arms. He tried to squirm away at first, then relaxed into it, taking a deep breath.

“You should tell him,” she said, pulling away and looking him in the eye.

“Are you crazy?!” Richie scoffed. “And ruin our friendship immediately? Yeah, right.”

“Do you seriously think that will happen? That he’ll never want to see you again?” she questioned.

“Yeah, I do! In case you missed it: I’m gay! And we all know what Eddie’s mom is like!” Richie exclaimed.

Bev flinched a bit at the mention of Sonia Kaspbrak.

“Eddie is not the same person as his mom. You know that,” she told him softly. “And you two are so close-”

“-You don’t get it, okay?” Richie cut in. “I can’t tell him.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

Sitting on the floor next to him, she followed his eyes to the wall.

“Does anyone else know?” she asked.

Richie shook his head.

“Are your parents-” she started.

Richie’s hands clenched the dirt, a visceral reaction.

Bev noticed.

“That bad, huh?” she asked.

“They’re… they’re not *bad* , but… they’ve never talked about it. I don’t think I could tell them,” he explained.

They sat in silence for a while, Richie picking up handfuls of dirt and letting them spill through his fingers, Bev drawing patterns in the soft ground. Richie was about to get up and leave when he heard laughter. Looking to his side, he saw Bev giggling, and gave her a questioning look.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said, trying to compose herself, “It’s just that I can’t believe you actually ate that worm.”

Richie shook his head, but couldn’t stop his smile from spreading across his face. “That wasn’t even that gross,” he said. “I’ve done worse.”

Bev stared at him for a second, then a knowing look came across her face. “Raw egg mixed with raspberry sorbet,” she remembered, a laugh hinting at the edge of her voice. “Jesus, I forgot you actually

ate that."

"Hey, money is money," Richie said, and for a moment it was just the two of them laughing and nothing else mattered.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

Sixteen years old.

It all started with a song. Happy birthday, to be precise. The group was all singing happy birthday and Eddie was sitting there just like every birthday he'd ever had, wondering what the proper etiquette was- do you smile? Do you sing along? Do you stare at a corner, embarrassed?

Eddie opted for the latter, fidgeting with his hands.

Richie was being especially obnoxious and singing out of tune at the top of his lungs, to which Eddie rolled his eyes.

When the song was finished, the group let out a unanimous "Happy birthday!" and Eddie blew out the single candle on his cake.

"Richie, why the fuck did you get a '5' candle?" Bev asked.

Richie feigned shock. "Eddie's not five? Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Shut up, Richie," Eddie said, carefully taking the slightly melted candle off the cake.

"What did you wish f-for?" Bill asked.

"He can't tell or it won't come true," Ben said. "That's the rule."

To tell the truth, Eddie hadn't wished for anything- it had slipped his mind completely. Not that he knew what he would have wished for in the first place anyway.

"Oh, please, he probably wished for another inhaler," Richie said, grabbing a slice of cake from Mike.

Mike looked at him in disbelief. "That was for Eddie!"

Richie shrugged. "There's plenty left!" he replied, gesturing towards

the rest of the cake

“I should have wished for you to stop being a dick,” Eddie told him, narrowing his eyes.

“Too bad,” Richie replied cheerfully through a mouthful of cake. “Guess you’ll have to see if that works next year!”

Even though everyone else got their slice of cake within a few seconds, by the time everyone had one in their hands Richie had already scarfed his down.

“Jesus, Richie, did you even taste it?” Bev asked.

Richie, now grabbing his second piece, mumbled “I’m starving,” and promptly shoveled down more.

“We *just* had pizza,” Bev pointed out. “Like, ten minutes ago.”

“Yeah, one slice!” Richie complained.

Eddie watched Stanley roll his eyes as he started on his slice of cake.

Bev cocked her head. “Do you even have a stomach, Rich? Or just a gaping hole?”

“He’s probably like Tarrare,” Ben joked.

He was met with blank stares.

“Who?” Bill asked.

“Tarrare?” Ben asked, searching for any familiarity from the group. “No one?”

“Dude, do you honestly think I know who that is?” Richie asked.

“He was a French soldier who basically got famous for how much he ate,” Ben explained. “He was always hungry and he ate all kinds of crazy stuff, like forks and stones. There were rumors that he even ate a toddler.”

“What the fuck,” Stan said, making a disgusted face.

“Dude, that’s sick,” Richie told Ben, who nodded before continuing.

“Anyway, when they cut him open after his death-”

“Oh god,” Eddie interrupted, “Don’t talk about that as I’m eating.”

“Yeah,” Stan agreed, “I do *not* want to hear about this right now.”

“You guys suck,” Richie pouted, continuing to eat his cake unaffectedly.

After the cake was gone, Bev announced that it was time for Eddie to open his presents.

“Okay, whose p-present is he opening first?” Bill asked.

“Mine!” Richie exclaimed, grabbing his from the pile and handing it to Eddie.

Eddie carefully opened it.

Not that he’d had any idea what he’d expected to be inside the lumpy package, but something he certainly had not anticipated was a bedazzled fanny pack.

Richie roared with laughter as Eddie held it up, and Bev, against her will, let out a shocked chuckle and immediately stopped herself, putting her hand over her mouth.

Everyone else shared the same look of shocked bemusement.

“Go fuck yourself, Richie,” Eddie started, only to be cut off by more of Richie’s laughter.

“Wait, wait,” Richie choked through his tears, “Open it, open it.”

Richie struggled to compose himself, wiping his eyes on his shirt as Eddie unzipped it.

Eddie stared at what was inside, seeing but not quite processing what it was.

“Richie… how did you get this?” he finally asked.

It was a first edition comic, one he'd wanted for *ages.* He wasn't even sure how Richie had known he'd wanted it, much less how he'd had managed to find and purchase it.

"I deal drugs," Richie grinned, giving a modest shrug of his shoulders.

"No, seriously, Richie, how did you-"

"-Well, if you must know," Richie said loudly, "I prostitute myself on the street."

"Oh, ha ha, *very funny* , Rich," Eddie scowled.

Richie just kept grinning at him. "Look inside again," he said.

Eddie did, gently taking out the comic. The inside of the fanny pack was bedazzled too.

"Fuck you," Eddie said.

"You're welcome, Spaghets! Happy birthday," Richie replied, and Eddie carefully placed the comic back inside.

Bev handed Eddie her gift next.

"Happy birthday," she said, giving him a smile.

Unlike Richie's, hers was wrapped up neatly, and Eddie gently opened it.

She'd gotten him art supplies. A notebook, good pencils, watercolors, charcoal.

"Do you like it, Eds?" she asked. "I know you like to draw, so I figured you could use some of these."

Eddie felt both touched and a little embarrassed at her thoughtfulness. He hadn't known anyone had noticed his doodles, scattered on the side of his notes.

"Bev, I…" he started, then trailed off. He didn't know how to express

what he was trying to say.

“Thank you,” he decided on.

“You’re welcome,” she replied understandingly, seeming pleased at his reaction.

Mike handed Eddie a box next.

“Bill, Ben, and I all chipped in for this one,” Mike told him.

It was a camera. A nice one, that must have been expensive. Eddie didn’t know what to say.

“We know your old camera broke, so…” Mike told him.

“It’s s-supposed to be really good,” Bill said, gesturing towards it. “G-Georgie helped us pick it out too.”

“Yeah, it holds more film and the photo quality is better,” Ben added.

Trying to ignore his tight throat, Eddie squeaked out a “thank you” and set it down.

“Hey, now we can add more pictures to the clubhouse,” Bev said.

“Georgie wants you to take lots of pictures of him,” Bill said enthusiastically. “He keeps all the old ones you took in his room.”

Bev grinned at Bill the way she always did when he managed a sentence without stuttering.

Eddie also smiled at Bill, nodding. “Tell him I’ll take as many as he wants,” he said.

“Okay, next present,” Bev said.

Stan handed his over.

His was wrapped perfectly, of course, and Eddie took care to peel off the tape and open it without ripping it.

He'd gotten Eddie a book of the world's most famous photographs, and some film to go along with his camera.

Eddie grabbed the book and flipped through it. "Here," Stanley said, crawling next to him and opening it to a specific page. "This one's my favorite," he said, showing Eddie the picture. "It reminds me of your pictures."

Eddie was overwhelmed.

"Thanks, Stan," he murmured.

Stan nodded, returning to where he'd been sitting.

Realizing that Richie had been pretty quiet during all of this, Eddie shot a glance at him, wondering if he'd somehow made him mad.

Richie's cheeks were slightly flushed, but he didn't quite look angry. In fact, he looked almost bored.

Eddie wondered what that meant.

"What now?" Mike asked, noticing the silence in the room.

"We should play a game," Stan said. "I mean, it's a birthday party, right?"

"Okay," Bev agreed. "Which one?"

"Truth or dare!" Richie chimed in, perking up.

"No," Stan responded quickly.

"Come on! We can have Eddie do a dare!" Richie pleaded. "He's never done one before!"

"Yes, he has?" Ben said, looking confused.

"Oh, yeah? When?" Richie demanded.

Ben opened his mouth to respond, then slowly closed it as he realized he couldn't remember Eddie ever doing a dare.

Eddie was mortified. While he was rarely picked to choose between the two, *of course* he'd always picked truth. Dares were gross; why would he?

However, it hadn't stopped anyone else- he could remember multiple times when everyone else had done a dare, and even though Richie favored doing dares, there were still times he chose truth.

"I'll do one," he mumbled, shrugging.

"Yes!" Richie cheered.

"Don't let him pressure you," Mike said. "You don't have to do one if you don't want to."

Eddie didn't exactly *want* to do a dare, but he still felt as though he should- everyone else had, and, well, he'd been trying things outside his comfort zone lately. "It's fine," he said.

"You should let me choose one for him," Richie said excitedly.

"No, spin the bottle," Stan said exasperatedly. "Like the rules say."

Richie groaned, grabbing the bottle and giving it a spin. To Eddie's immense relief, it landed on Bev, who, although known to have a mischievous side, was a mile better than anything Richie had to offer.

Bev, unsurprisingly, looked to Eddie. "Truth or dare?"

"Dare," he said softly.

"Okay, Eds," she started, taking a pause to analyze him for a bit, "I dare you to kiss Richie."

Fuck.

Eddie could not stop the heat from spreading through his cheeks as he processed what she'd said.

Kiss Richie? He'd never kissed *anyone,* much less his best friend.

Not that he hadn't, well, *thought* about kissing Richie, but he'd been about a thousand percent sure that this would never happen in reality. Yet, here he was.

"Fuck yeah, Eddie Spaghetti, lay one on me!" Richie yelled, seeming absolutely thrilled about this string of events.

The rest of the group seemed stunned- Eddie doubted anyone had expected this.

He tried to ignore his shaking hands, *tried* to seem nonchalant.

It's just a kiss, he told himself, reminding himself of the time Richie had been dared to kiss Bill and had done it without hesitation.

It wasn't weird for them, he thought. Why should it be different now?

Eddie didn't trust himself to respond to either Richie or Bev; he just planted himself next to Richie, and without thinking, kissed him.

Eddie didn't know what he'd quite expected from kisses, but this was none of those things. It was short and warm and Richie's lips were soft, and then Eddie had pulled away, worried he might be giving himself away if he stayed too long.

Again trying to stop his cheeks from flushing, he glanced at Richie and found that he looked just as flustered, almost…

Eddie couldn't find the word for it before the expression was gone and Richie was once again grinning.

"Well, birthday boy," Richie started, "That was the best birthday gift anyone could have given you. Kisses from Richie Tozier are sought after for miles, more valued than jewels-"

"-Shut up, Richie," Eddie interrupted, but he couldn't stop a slight smile from spreading across his face as he crawled back into his place in the circle.

Throughout the rest of the night, Eddie swore that he could feel Richie glancing over at him, but he looked away as soon as someone noticed.

Eventually, he caught Richie in the middle of it and Richie flushed hard, immediately looking at the floor.

The glances stopped after that.

Eddie, again, wondered what it meant.

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Richie was trying not to die.

Well, not really, but it sure felt like it.

The night had been a whirlwind of emotions and, frankly? He wasn't enjoying it.

God, he thought- Eddie had kissed him! But *god,* everyone had been watching and now it was awkward.

Richie was also pretty sure that Eddie had noticed at least one of his occasional glances, and *fuck,* that was not good.

However, it was impossible for Richie not to think of that kiss. And any time he thought about it, he accidentally wound up staring at Eddie. So essentially, he'd subconsciously ended up gazing at Eddie kind of a lot.

Which, Bev was sure to tease him about later, but he could handle her. What he couldn't handle was if someone else had detected what those stares meant- if he'd given himself away.

It felt like a million years of agony before the party finally wrapped up and everyone started to leave.

Richie had climbed out as well, but then he saw Eddie talking to Stan and realized two things at once:

One , he had forgotten that Bev had asked to talk to him after the

party, and she was still down in the clubhouse, and *two*- there was no denying he was jealous of Stan and Eddie's friendship, and therefore it was a good idea to stay away. He'd managed to stay silent when Stanley had given him that book, but it had taken all of his willpower and he'd only been able to sit there and stare at a rock on the ground.

So, quickly, he decided to return to the clubhouse, planning to vent to Bev.

Unfortunately, Mike and Bill were still down there, talking about Bill's new car.

Richie couldn't even pretend he was at all interested in that, so he grabbed a magazine and took a seat, pretending to read it as they talked.

And then, *finally,* Bill and Mike said their goodbyes and left.

As soon as they were alone, Richie turned to Bev. "Hey, what the FUCK," he hissed.

Bev just shrugged, acting oblivious. "What?"

"You fucking dared Eddie to kiss me, that's *what* !" Richie exclaimed, clumsily taking a seat on the floor. "Are you crazy?!"

Smirking, Bev sat beside him. "Yeah, but *he did it,"* she said.

"Yeah! Cause you *dared* him to!"

Bev rolled her eyes. "Hey, genius, I wasn't the one yelling at him to 'lay one on you,'" she said, nudging his shoulder. "That's not exactly subtle."

"It was a joke*,"* Richie quickly defended himself. "I had to break the tension somehow! Besides, it's a little hard to be subtle when you're daring him to kiss me!"

Bev scoffed. "Richie," she said. Richie refused to look at her.

"What?" he asked, staring stubbornly at the wall.

“ *Richie,”* she repeated, and this time he met her gaze. “Tell him you like him!”

Seeing Richie shake his head, Bev nudged him again. “You know that with the way you’re acting, he’s going to figure it out, right?” she pointed out.

“Not if you’re not daring him to kiss me all the time!” Richie replied, flustered.

“Dude, you were staring at him all night,” Bev said, shifting into a more comfortable position. “He’s not blind. He noticed.”

“I mean, *fuck,* Bev, *”* Richie muttered. “You can’t expect me to just… function after that.”

“You can’t think about kissing him while staring at the wall? Or the floor?” she teased, grinning.

Richie gently kicked her. “Fuck off,” he said, but he was smiling too.

“Richie, he’s not stupid,” Bev murmured.

Richie looked at her, confused. “I know. Eddie’s really smart-“

Bev shook her head. “No, Richie, I mean that when he puts the fact that you yelled at him to kiss you, together with you staring at him all the time *and* getting him a very expensive meaningful gift…”

Sighing, Bev got up and stretched. “One way or another, he’s gonna add it up. I think you should be the one to tell him.”

Richie didn’t know how to reply. He didn’t trust himself to.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Richie,” she said.

“Bye, Bev,” he replied, though she was already gone.

“ *Fuck,”* he muttered, then stood up and followed in her tracks.

When he got out, he was met with a mortifying sight- Eddie was there, *waiting to talk to him.*

He must have been waiting the whole time Richie had been talking to Bev.

Fuck! .

“Hi, Richie,” Eddie greeted him nervously. “Can we talk?”

As far as sentences go in causing immediate dread and panic, Richie was pretty sure that ‘can we talk’ was second only to ‘I know what you’re hiding.’

“Yeah, okay,” he replied, trying to mask the complete terror he felt.

Does he know?

Eddie shifted. “Is this a bad time? We can do it later?”

“No, no,” Richie choked. “I mean, now is fine.”

If he had to wait any longer to hear what Eddie was going to say, Richie felt he might die.

Eddie took a seat on a log, and it struck Richie that he should probably sit as well, so he sat down next to him. The log was so small that it was a tight fit- Richie’s shoulders were touching Eddie’s. He tried not to think about that.

“Okay, well… I just wanted to make sure we’re okay,” Eddie started.

Richie looked at him. “What do you mean?” he asked.

It was slowly occurring to Richie that Eddie had probably meant for him to take a seat *across* from him, not right next to him, but since he was sat, and Eddie had already started talking, it was too late to move.

Shit.

Eddie looked at him, cheeks slowly growing pink, and he started to talk fast like he always did when he was nervous.

“I just- I noticed you were pretty quiet tonight, especially after we

kissed and you're almost never quiet so I thought maybe you were mad at me or grossed out or something, and I don't want it to be awkward between us now," Eddie blurted, then stopped abruptly, looking embarrassed.

"What?" Richie said, almost laughing from relief. "God no, Eds, I'm not mad, nothing like that. I mean, I don't care about the kiss."

Eddie looked at the ground. "Oh."

Wait, shit.

"Wait, I didn't mean- I mean, I *liked* the kiss, I just didn't, you know, I wasn't, um… I like kissing girls, so…"

Eddie glanced over at him. "Okay," he said softly.

This was awkward. Eddie had *just* said he didn't want it to be awkward. Frantically, Richie tried to fix this.

"Not that you're bad at kissing, or something- because you're good- at kissing, I mean," he said, slowly realizing how that sounded.

Now Eddie was staring at him. Which really didn't help because Richie was noticing that the sun was hitting Eddie's eyes and causing him to squint ever so slightly, and Richie was finding that extremely endearing.

"I mean, I like kissing girls but I could still tell, you know, it was a nice kiss," he stammered.

This was definitely worse. He'd just said he liked kissing girls twice in a space of two sentences. Neither of them had sounded convincing.

Briefly, he considered packing his stuff and moving away, never to be seen again after this mortifying conversation. He quickly scrapped the idea.

"Right," Eddie finally responded, looking extremely confused.

Richie briefly wondered if he'd essentially outed himself, but Eddie was still seemingly waiting for a response.

This was a situation that desperately required Richie's brain to work. However, for some *godforsaken* reason, his brain seemed much less concerned with what was coming out of his mouth and much more intent on replaying the recent memory of the kiss over and over.

Still, Eddie was waiting.

"Anyway... yeah… I like kissing girls," Richie concluded painfully. His face was burning.

Not only had that somehow managed to sound even *more* unconvincing than the first two times he'd said it, he also realized that he was now staring at Eddie's lips and thinking of the kiss again. And, somehow, the two of them had ended up *very* close together.

It had just crossed Richie that if he tilted his head in he'd be kissing Eddie again, when suddenly there was a noise in the distance and they immediately scrambled apart.

The noise was Ben, who smiled at them as he got closer.

"Hey guys!" he greeted them, "I just came back to get my… book..."

Seeing their faces, he slowly trailed off.

"Oh, did I interrupt something?" he asked.

Eddie looked about as inconspicuous as a man with bloody hands at a crime scene, and Richie imagined he probably looked the same.

"No," Richie said quickly. "I was just, um…telling Eddie happy birthday again."

He swiftly stood up, brushing off his legs. Summoning all his willpower, he looked at Eddie, "Happy birthday, Eddie," he told him.

Eddie met his gaze steadily.

"Thanks?" he replied, looking more confused than ever.

Richie finally tore his eyes away and looked at Ben.

“I’ll see you guys tomorrow,” he said, and left.

Ben turned to Eddie.

“Oh. Well, happy birthday again, Eddie.”

Eddie’s face now matched the sunset behind him.

“Thanks,” he managed.

3. Chapter 3

Pain. That was the word Eddie was looking for. This was *painful.* All of it, in different ways.

Painful in the times he had to hide himself, create a mask of forced smiles and “Yes, Mom,” and agreeing nods as his mother rambled on about things that she hated, things that were hidden inside Eddie. It stung. To know that if she knew who he was, she’d hate him.

And it was always painful with Richie, in different ways.

Sometimes it felt like a knife through his chest, the longing. A fresh pang of sharp, icy yearning every time Richie’s eyes met his. The deep aching that settled in his bones as he watched Richie smile.

A dull, uncomfortable throbbing behind his ribs that had been there for years; throbbing that appeared when Eddie thought about the life with Richie that he wanted but would never get.

Richie didn’t like him back- there were plenty of signs of that. And that hurt too, the way it hurt to be unable to breathe.

But even with all the pain he’d experienced, he was still shocked that it was painful now. An incredibly uncomfortable sort of irritation, like a stitch in his side, to be in this situation.

For some reason, Eddie had just supposed that girls would never be interested- and, luckily, for the most part, they didn’t really seem to be. But, with the spring dance coming up, people were desperate for partners.

And that was how he found himself in his living room with his mother and Amy Price, who had just asked him to the dance.

He wanted to say no. He really did. Amy was nice, but he’d planned on asking the losers for a game night that night and, more importantly, he wasn’t attracted to her.

Not that any of that mattered, because she had asked him within earshot of his mother. His mother, who had not only been pressuring

him to find someone lately but also knew that Eddie was free the night of the dance. If he said no, he knew his mother was likely to ask questions, and Eddie really didn't want to answer them.

It's just for one night, he thought to himself.

"I, um... okay," he told Amy thinly. He was at a loss for any other words, but she didn't seem to mind. Throwing her arms around his neck, she squeezed him tightly and then beamed up at him. "Yes! We're going to be the cutest couple there!" she exclaimed.

Couple? Eddie thought anxiously.

And then Amy kissed his cheek, and Eddie could not find it in him to think anything but a single word:

Fuck.

***

Five years. That was how long Miss Beverly Marsh had been in agony. Five long, excruciating, frustrating and seemingly never-ending years.

When Eddie had first come to her all those years ago, panicked, it had taken her half an hour to coax out what he so badly wanted to tell her:

"I think I'm gay," he'd finally said, squeezing his eyes closed as though if he couldn't see the world, it couldn't see him.

"Oh," she'd responded softly. "Why do you think that?"

"Because I don't like girls," he'd told her.

Bev had given a small nod. "Okay."

"And," he'd continued. "I think I like Richie. A lot."

Oh, she remembered thinking.

Even though she'd been unsure of what to say, she'd done her best to console Eddie.

But then, two weeks later, Richie had confessed to her that he liked Eddie. And thus had begun the goal: to get Richie and Eddie together.

Unfortunately, it hadn't worked like that. Both of the boys were deathly afraid to tell anyone else, even each other, their feelings. And, no matter what Bev did, she couldn't seem to change that. She thought about talking to them- to tell Richie Eddie liked him, and vice versa, but in the end couldn't bring herself to break their trust, no matter how it would benefit them.

So she'd stayed silent, watching in distress as for *five years,* they'd undergone this exhausting dance.

And now, here Eddie was telling her he'd accidentally gotten a girlfriend, and for a second Bev thought she might actually burst into tears. But, she'd been through much worse than this, and Eddie was obviously panicked, so she held herself together for him.

"Okay, wait, wait," she started. "How did you *accidentally* get a girlfriend?"

Eddie breathed in anxiously, and for a second Bev wondered if he'd need his inhaler, but he didn't- he started rambling instead.

"Well, she asked me to the spring dance, and I was going to tell her no but my mom was there, and you know how my mom keeps asking about if I like anyone and when I'm going to go on a date, and how I'm seventeen and should have a girlfriend, so I panicked and told her yes, but she keeps calling us a couple and coming over after school, and the other day she called herself my *girlfriend,* Bev, my fucking girlfriend! And I've only known her for, like, a couple weeks! But I don't know what to do, because isn't she supposed to fucking *ask* if we're boyfriend and girlfriend? I thought you had to ask! I don't even like girls! I mean, I don't really want her to be my girlfriend, but I don't want her to feel bad either, so I've just been going along with it, but I don't want anyone to hear about it or something, and..." He

paused to take in a shaky breath. “I don’t know what to do now.”

Bev gazed at him with wide eyes, trying to process everything he’d just said.

“Yeah, um, normally you’re supposed to ask about officially becoming a couple,” she said. “So it’s probably not the greatest sign she didn’t talk to you.”

This time, Eddie did reach for his inhaler.

“The dance is in two weeks,” Bev pointed out as he inhaled the medication. “What’s your plan?”

Eddie avoided her gaze as he put the inhaler away.

“I’ll probably stay with her until then, I guess,” he mumbled.

“Okay,” Bev said. “Is your mom happy, at least? That you two are spending time together?”

Eddie’s brows furrowed at the mention of his mother, but he gave a nod. “Yeah. I think. She’s been letting me go more places than usual, and she invites Amy over and… she really likes her.”

Bev gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “That’s good, at least.”

Eddie stared at the ground, swallowing hard.

“What if… what if we stayed together?” he asked slowly. “If my mom is happy we’re together, I should just… I mean, it’s not like anyone else is wanting to date me, and Amy really isn’t bad- she’s nice. Maybe we should stay together until I’m eighteen. Just to make it easier.”

He looked to Bev, seemingly hoping for reassurance.

“If that’s what you want,” Bev replied.

Eddie nodded.

“Oh, Eds, um… How do you feel about the group knowing you two are together?” Bev asked.

Eddie made a face but weighed it out. “They should probably know, right?” he asked her.

“Well, they don’t have to know if you don’t want them to,” Bev replied.

Eddie sighed, fidgeting with his fingers. “They’ll probably figure it out anyway, if she’s with me a lot.”

“Yeah,” Bev agreed. “Probably.”

Eddie shifted. “Do you think I should like… announce it? Tomorrow?” he asked her.

“That’d be a good time, yeah,” she said encouragingly.

“If Richie isn’t an asshole,” Eddie pointed out.

Bev suddenly stiffened.

Oh fuck. The one person nearly guaranteed to take the news terribly. ***Richie.***

***

Richie was having a truly miserable day. In fact, it was beginning to look like the second-worst day of his life, *just* behind the day that Bowers had stolen his sketchbook, ripped out the pages, called him a slur, and knocked him into a locker- hard enough that it had left a bruise.

That had been worse. But that didn’t stop today from still being incredibly shitty.

First, he’d woken up late, causing him to miss the bus, which he was

only able to confirm *after* he'd walked half a mile to the bus stop in the rain, getting splashed by a car in the process. Upon opening his sopping backpack, he'd realized that his homework and art project he'd spent hours on were both now ruined. There were blisters on his feet from his wet socks, his wet jeans had chafed against his thighs and caused a rash, and he was beginning to feel like he was coming down with a cold.

He'd managed to use a payphone to call Stan- who lived the closest- and ask him for a ride, but it had been the longest and coldest ten minutes of his life as he'd waited for Stan to arrive.

Stan had kindly brought him a pair of dry clothes to change into, which, though better than Richie's drenched ones, were slightly humiliating to wear.

Thankfully, Richie was now dry and on his lunch period, but more than anything he wanted to go home.

He was so miserable he barely noticed Bev taking a seat beside him.

"Hey," Bev greeted him.

He plopped his head in his arms. "Hey," Richie answered.

"Listen, I have some pretty shitty news," she said.

Richie almost laughed. Surely this day could not get any worse, right?

"Richie... Eddie has a girlfriend," Bev continued.

Wrong.

This was definitely the worst day of his life.

So many emotions were passing through him, he didn't know what to say.

"Who?" he finally grumbled, not bothering to sit up.

"Amy Price," came the reply.

It took him a second to even think of who that was, what she looked like. Richie doubted he'd ever spoken a word to her. And now Eddie was *dating* her.

A twinge of jealousy ran through him at that thought, the thought of Eddie dating someone that barely knew him, when Richie knew Eddie better than anyone. He tried picturing the two of them together, but it wouldn't compute in his brain correctly.

"They're going to the dance together," Bev continued at Richie's silence, rubbing his back reassuringly. "Eddie's going to tell everyone soon, but… I figured I should warn you."

Richie just nodded.

It was strange- besides the initial moment of jealousy, Richie wasn't feeling much currently- it was almost as if he'd numbed out completely. He wondered if he was in shock, or maybe he just was unable to process that many feelings at once.

"Okay," he forced himself to reply. "Thanks, Bev."

He kept his head in his arms until Stan arrived.

"Hey. Move, please," he instructed to Richie, who was taking up most of the table.

Richie grumpily obeyed, sitting up and out of Stan's way, and Stan took a seat next to him.

"Here," Stan said, handing him a thermos. "It's tea. Ben told me to give it to you. "

"Why?" Richie asked, opening it and taking a sniff. It smelled like honey and lemon.

"It'll keep you from getting sick," Stan responded, setting out his lunch. "Since Ben doesn't have a class or lunch period with you today, he asked me to deliver it."

Richie shrugged, and carefully blew on the hot liquid.

“Hey, do you guys know what’s for lunch today?” Bev asked.

“Grilled cheese,” Stan replied, and Richie shot up.

“I’m starving,” he declared, setting down Ben’s thermos.

“Wait up, I’m coming too,” Bev said, standing up.

Stan rolled his eyes. “Rich, you always say you’re starving.”

Richie flashed him a smile. “One of my many talents- I’m always hungry,” he said.

“Alright, let’s go, Rich,” Bev said, and they headed to the line.

As they waited, Bev playfully nudged him, then her face went solemn.

“Rich... I know this is hard on you, but- *hey* !”

Greta had clipped Bev’s shoulder, interrupting what she’d been saying.

“What the fuck, Greta?” Richie exclaimed, which Greta ignored as she walked away.

Bev wrinkled her nose, gripping her shoulder. “ *Bitch,”* she muttered.

“You okay?” Richie asked.

“Yeah,” Bev confirmed, “I’m fine.”

“Where’s karma when you need it?” Richie asked as they grabbed their trays.

“Her karma is that she’ll die alone,” Bev said, and Richie couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

On their way back to the table, he caught himself looking for Amy, but she was nowhere to be found- he supposed she probably had a different lunch period.

Probably the same one as Eddie, he thought, and the jealous twinge in

his stomach reappeared.

When lunch was over, he once again caught himself looking for her on the way to classes, and after school as he walked to the clubhouse with Bev and Mike, but Amy was nowhere to be seen.

The more Richie thought about Eddie having a girlfriend, the less he wanted to hear it from Eddie himself. Bev warning him had helped, but it would be so much worse to possibly see them together, to catch any displays of affection, to hear Eddie making it a reality.

The closer Richie got to seeing Eddie, the more anxious he got- there was an uneasy knot clenched in his chest, and he was having to steady out his breathing to keep himself calm.

Bev was watching him, he knew it, but it came as some sort of comfort, honestly, that he wasn't alone.

When they arrived, Mike climbed down the ladder, and before Richie could follow, Bev grabbed Richie's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"It'll be okay," she softly reassured him. Richie couldn't do more than nod, but he returned her hand squeeze, then followed Stan down the ladder.

Everyone but Bev was already down there, and Bev dropped in just a moment after Richie.

"Hey, guys!" Ben greeted them, and Richie's heart dropped to his stomach as he made eye contact with Eddie.

"Are you okay, Rich?" Bill said, gazing at him. "You look like you've just seen a ghost."

Richie caught Eddie looking at him worriedly.

"Oh!" Richie said as he suddenly remembered Ben's thermos. He knelt down and opened up his bag to grab it, and Bev caught a glance at the contents inside as he did.

"Oh no, Richie, your project!" she exclaimed, kneeling next to him.

“Shit, what happened?” Stan asked.

Richie shrugged. “Rain,” he said, handing the thermos to Ben.

“Did it help?” Ben asked eagerly. “My mom does that when I’m sick.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Richie said, and Ben beamed.

“I can bring more tomorrow!” he informed Richie happily.

“You’re getting sick?” Eddie asked warily.

Richie briefly considered teasing him, but he really did not have it in him today.

“Maybe,” he said. “I felt weird earlier.”

“Oh,” Eddie remarked, “Well, you should probably get a lot of liquids, and enough sleep, and make sure you wear warm clothes.”

“Yeah, and soup is supposed to help. Hot liquids,” Mike added. “By the way, are those… Stan’s clothes?”

“Oh, yeah,” Richie replied. “Mine got soaked earlier.”

“He missed the bus, so I gave him a ride to school,” Stan explained. “But it was raining, so I brought him some dry clothes.”

“Why did you walk in the rain?” Eddie asked Richie, his brow creasing.

“Our umbrella broke last week,” Richie replied. “We didn’t have any spares. And my dad had already left for work so I couldn’t ask him for a ride.”

“Sorry, Rich, that sucks,” Bill said.

Richie wanted the attention off of him.

“Sucks like your mom last night!” he replied, and like on cue, the group groaned and moved their interests.

“Hey, Eddie, who was that girl you were walking with?” Ben asked.

Richie's stomach jolted. *Oh no.* Thank God Bev had warned him about her.

Eddie's cheeks flushed. "Oh," he said. That's Amy." He paused for a second, then quickly added, "My girlfriend."

There was a shocked silence, and then Ben said, "Oh! Congrats!" and everyone was suddenly laughing and congratulating Eddie.

Richie wondered what he should do.

"What's she like?" Mike asked.

"She's nice," Eddie said meekly, "She likes to make her own clothes and stuff."

"Cool," Bev grinned, and it dawned on Richie that Bev was a very good actor.

Richie, unfortunately, was not.

"Y-you should invite her to game night!" Bill said, and the rest of the group gave a set of agreements.

Except for Richie.

He was no longer numb, but very far from it: he was feeling more fiercely than ever. Jealousy, anger, bitterness, sadness, he felt it all.

Feeling a nudge on his shoulder, he glanced over to see Bev looking at him with wide eyes, clearly telling him to say or do *something.*

He managed to give a grin to Eddie and say something like 'Nice, Kaspbrak,' but only by thinking intensely about how he wanted Eddie to be happy, even if it meant Eddie was happy with someone like Amy.

Even if Eddie ended up happy without *him.*

***

Richie was silent.

Eddie had anticipated a lot of reactions from him about Amy; specifically endless mockery, teasing, and general obnoxiousness. But Richie was simply… *silent* .

And somehow that was the worst response Eddie could have imagined.

He tried anxiously tried not to stare, tried to focus on the losers, but he only barely registered that Mike had asked him what Amy was like.

Giving the others a weak smile, he mumbled something about Amy being nice and making her own clothes.

It was awful to have to tell them about her, but still an awful necessity.

Especially having to tell Richie. Eddie felt almost panicked, as if being unavailable would suddenly make Richie not want him (not that he ever *had*).

Still, there was the anxiety, the short breaths, the useless worrying.

But then Richie shrugged and gave him a grin. “Nice, Kaspbrak!”

It was too nice. Eddie knew it was.

Richie was an asshole, almost always, and this was the perfect time for him to say something gross, but instead, he was congratulating Eddie?

“Thanks,” Eddie said unnaturally.

“Is she hot?” Richie asked, and Eddie felt himself relax.

Oh, Eddie thought, *see? You’re just overthinking. Richie doesn’t give a*

shit that you're dating now.

"Shut up, Rich," he replied.

He managed the rest of the night fine, and by six o'clock, he'd nearly forgotten about his worries.

But that relief did not last.

Over the next couple of weeks, something became very clear- Richie did not like Amy.

Any time she was present, Richie seemed hell-bent on making everyone within a twenty-foot radius two seconds away from strangling him.

Then there were the constant snarky remarks any time Amy showed Eddie any affection.

Once, Amy had kissed Eddie's cheek, and Richie had angrily brushed past them, scoffing at them to get a room.

Richie never talked directly *to* Amy, either, and whenever he was informed that Amy would be joining the group, he often wouldn't show.

Eddie, meanwhile, was struggling to figure out what he wanted.

A part of him was angry that Richie was being so immature, even though he understood- when the group had been interrupted friends for so long, it was jarring to add someone new. And Amy's displays of affection made *everyone* , including Eddie, pretty uncomfortable.

But Amy was nice and witty, and Eddie found himself growing to really like her. There was no attraction, of course, but he enjoyed being around her.

And then there was his mom- she was so much more bearable when Amy was around. She fussed over Eddie less, was more flexible on when Eddie could meet with the group and how late he could stay, was less critical on him.

It was like a breath of fresh air to have that freedom.

Unfortunately, there were still lots of things that Eddie found terrible, especially kissing, which Amy seemed to want to do a lot.

His only previous experience with kissing had been Richie, and Eddie often wondered if that really counted.

But Eddie did not like kissing Amy. It felt strange and not good, and he really just wanted to be kissing Richie.

But it wasn't *that* bad.

What was awful about him and Amy was that he barely saw Richie anymore. Over the span of two weeks, they'd seemed to stop talking completely, which hurt.

Eddie wanted to approach him, but never seemed to find the right words or time, and Amy constantly clinging to his shoulder didn't help.

Something else Eddie had found that he hadn't anticipated was the suffocating feeling that came with a relationship.

Not the commitment, but the idea- that everyone saw him dating a *girl* , and how he knew he would have to break up with Amy eventually, and how much more difficult coming out (if he ever actually managed to do that) would be for him now.

On the night of the dance, Eddie found himself sitting in his car, pacing his breathing, wishing all of it would just *end* .

The dance had been fine. Lots of pictures, excessive slow dances, meaningless conversations with her friends. A little awkward, maybe, but fine.

But everything he had done with Amy, every conversation he'd had with her, every song they danced to, Eddie still found himself longing for it to be Richie.

Richie, with his dumb jokes and purposeful clumsiness and sarcasm that left Eddie rolling his eyes, but unable to hides his smiles.

Amy could never be a replacement for Richie.

Eddie just wanted it to end.

And then, a few days later, Amy did something Eddie had simply not anticipated.

She broke up with him.

And he found himself there, staring at her numbly, processing what she had just said.

Be careful what you wish for, he thought humorlessly.

“I’m sorry, Eddie, I just… I’m going away to college and, honestly? I don’t know if you really like me all that much,” Amy explained. “You never tell me that you like me, or love me, or anything, and you don’t seem to like kissing me, and… I don’t know, Eddie, we just don’t fit.”

That’s fair, Eddie thought.

“Okay,” he managed, feeling a combination of panic and relief. “It’s okay. I understand.”

His words fell flat, but Amy nodded and hugged him.

“I hope you find someone for you,” she said, and left.

Eddie was left alone, trying to process exactly how he was feeling.

A part of him was hurt. He knew that Amy’s concerns were completely understandable and true, and that it wasn’t fair of her to be trapped in a relationship with someone who wasn’t attracted to her, but that didn’t stop him from feeling as if a part of him weren’t good enough.

It was also awful to anticipate having to tell everyone.

And then part of him was so, so relieved that it was finally over, that he’d never have to kiss her again.

His mom might be upset, but he could deal with her. After all, there were only a few months until he turned eighteen, and the group had all talked about moving in together, and then he'd be free of her.

"Hey, Eds!" he heard someone behind him call, and immediately recognized the voice as Richie.

Oh god, he thought, turning around.

"Where's Miss PDA?" Richie asked.

Eddie flushed. "Her name is Amy," he started, stubbornly beginning the walk home.

Richie rolled his eyes, following him. "Whatever. Is she gonna be at game night?"

Eddie stopped abruptly, and Richie bumped into him.

"What the fuck?" he started.

"She broke up with me," Eddie said suddenly.

Richie was silent for a moment, then he let out a laugh.

"Thank god!" he cheered.

Eddie, who was holding back tears, glared at him.

"Oh," Richie said, seeing his face. "Shit, I'm sorry."

"Why do you hate her so much?" Eddie asked.

Richie opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted by a noise behind him.

It was Bowers and his friends. Automatically, Richie and Eddie steered towards the woods, away from them, barely managing to stay out of their view.

"Fuck," Richie muttered as their group passed, "I hate him."

Eddie stared at him. "You never answered."

Richie gave him a puzzled look. “Answered what?”

“Why you hate Amy,” Eddie clarified.

“I don’t *hate* her,” Richie replied. “You guys just… didn’t work.”

“What does that mean?” Eddie asked, letting his anger rise into his voice. He knew what Richie meant but still wanted to hear it from him.

“Nothing, I didn’t-“

“Why have you been avoiding me?” Eddie asked bluntly, interrupting Richie. “I mean, as soon as you heard that we were together, it was like we weren’t even friends anymore! Me having a girlfriend shouldn’t change that!”

Richie looked at him. “Did you ever think that maybe I didn’t want to see you two sucking face all the time? Jesus, Eds, it was like she couldn’t go anywhere without you.”

Eddie shook his head. “Even when we were apart, you would make up excuses not to spend time with me.”

Richie looked taken aback. “It wasn’t like that!” he insisted.

“Then what was it like?” Eddie choked through the lump in his throat, hating the fact that when he got angry he cried. “Why were you so happy Amy and I are over? Have you just been sitting here the whole time hoping that we’d break up?”

“I mean, yeah, Eds! You can do a lot better than *her!* ” Richie scoffed.

“Well, sorry, Richie, it’s not like people are lining up down the block to date me!” Eddie cried, his voice rising with his anger.

He knew his temper was getting out of hand, but he couldn’t help it. Everything was so much and so loud and Eddie desperately felt the need to match it.

“Eddie,” Richie started. “Trust me, there’s lots of people who-“

“No, Richie! There aren’t! Name one person who is any better than Amy who wants to date me!” Eddie exclaimed.

“Eds-“

“You can't! Because no one does!”

“Yes, they do!” Richie replied, and his voice had gotten as loud as Eddie’s.

“Like who?” Eddie burst, on the edge of tears again. “Who?”

“Me! Fucking *me!* ” Richie yelled, and suddenly the whole world went silent.

***

Richie often said a lot of things he hadn’t meant to. He was just impulsive like that. If he got angry enough, flustered enough, they’d just slip out, regardless of whether or not it left him fucked over afterward.

Be that as it may, he’d never thought he’d be capable of spilling his deepest secret so casually. It had been so locked up inside him at this point that he’d doubted he’d even be able to say the words.

But he could. Because he just had, essentially.

And now, he was simply *fucked* , left in shocked silence.

Everything, *everything* he’d ever been afraid of saying, he’d virtually just said. And there was no way to take it back now.

Eddie was staring at him with wide eyes as if he were waiting for Richie to keep arguing, or say there was a mistake, or to burst into laughter- as if his outburst had been a cruel joke.

But, instead, Richie stared right back at him, in so much shock at

what he'd just said that he could not force himself to do any of those things.

" *You?* " Eddie said softly.

Richie was so tired of pretending, of hiding, of acting like someone he wasn't.

Eddie had heard him, there was no way he had somehow misperceived his words, and Richie wasn't going to act like Eddie was stupid.

"Yeah, I'm..." he paused to let out a shuddering exhale, burying his hands in his pockets. "I'm gay, Eds."

"Gay," Eddie repeated slowly. "And you want to *date* me?"

Richie was feeling as though he might pass out at any moment, but he nodded. "Yeah. I like you, Eddie. A lot."

Eddie took a step toward, his brow furrowing. "How long?" he asked.

"How long have I liked you?" Richie asked, and Eddie nodded in reply.

Richie shrugged, avoiding Eddie's gaze. "A long time. Like, since we were kids. Since we met, I think."

Eddie stared at him, and Richie shifted his weight, trying to ease the awkwardness.

"Richie," Eddie started, and Richie took his pause as an opportunity to jump in.

"Eddie, I didn't… mean to tell you. You don't have to, like, say anything, or-"

"Richie, shut up," Eddie replied, and Richie did.

Keeping Richie's gaze, Eddie took another step closer, until they were close enough that Richie had to fight the urge to pull away.

“You’re being serious. One hundred percent serious?” Eddie asked.

“Eds, I wouldn’t joke about that,” Richie replied, and he had the full intent to expand on that statement, but he found himself interrupted by Eddie kissing him.

The kiss was so short, and so sweet, that Richie barely registered it before Eddie pulled away.

Richie stared at him in shock.

“What?” he asked. It was the only word he could think of.

“I’m gay too, dumbass,” Eddie revealed. “And I’ve liked you for, like, five years now.”

Richie had to remind himself to breathe, he was so stunned. *What the fuck are the odds of that?* he thought, wondering how any of this was really happening.

“You like me?” Richie repeated, his brain not quite being cohesive enough to understand.

Eddie’s cheeks went red. “I think it’s a lot more than *like,* ” he said nervously. “I think maybe I’m in love with you?”

“But- Amy?” Richie stammered.

“Oh, Eddie said, making a face. “She asked me to the dance in front of my mom. I told her yes thinking it was just the one night.”

Richie nodded, relieved, and Eddie continued. “Anyway after that, she started calling herself my girlfriend, and my mom seemed happy about it so…” he gave a shrug, looking up at Richie. “I just went along with it. I thought it’d be easier.”

“Oh,” Richie said. It was all he could manage.

Eddie suddenly laughed and squeezed Richie’s hand, finally breaking Richie out of his shocked daze.

“What?” Richie asked him.

“God, you really didn’t hate Amy,” Eddie exclaimed, “You were *jealous* !”

Richie flushed a pale pink as Eddie continued on.

“So that’s why you were weird after my sixteenth birthday party! You were worried I’d figure out you were gay! And that’s why you just went on and on about how you only liked kissing girls, and why you seemed so nervous, and why you left when Ben came.” Eddie let out a laugh, shaking his head. “Jesus, this whole time I was so confused about why you acted like that!”

Richie shrugged, his face burning. “I thought you’d hate me if you knew,” he admitted.

Eddie’s expression solemned. “I don’t think I could ever hate you, Richie. Even if I wasn’t...in love with you.”

Richie grinned slyly. “So… you’re in love with me?” he asked.

Eddie looked at him in disbelief. “I just told you that twice.”

Richie nodded. “Okay, well, I’m in love with you too.”

A grin tugged at Eddie’s lips. “Good. Because it would have been pretty awkward if… you didn’t,” he said.

Richie just gazed at him, smiling.

“What?” Eddie asked.

“I love you,” Richie said again, shrugging. “Now we’ve both said it twice.”

It was cheesy, so cheesy, but Richie found that he could not have cared less.

And then, softly, he leaned down and pulled Eddie into another kiss.

4. Epilogue- Never Gonna Give You Up

It took a while to figure out how to tell the group, even after Ben and Beverly had revealed they were a couple.

Richie offered the idea of telling everyone at his eighteenth birthday party, but Eddie had immediately rejected it. And then Richie had suggested perhaps *Eddie's* eighteenth birthday party, but Eddie turned that down again on the premises of the fact that his mother had insisted on being there. That party had been the longest and most awkward hour of Richie's life.

And now that they were moving into a house with the rest of the losers, it would be harder to keep their relationship a secret.

"Let's tell them tonight," Eddie said out of the blue, a couple of weeks after they'd moved in Richie nearly choked on his orange juice.

"Why tonight?" he asked.

Eddie shrugged. "Because no time is ever going to feel… right. So let's just get it over with."

Richie nodded. "Okay," he said, and he'd felt the beginnings of anxiety form in his stomach.

For the rest of the day, he and Eddie had talked it out, every time they were alone. What they were going to say.

And then, finally, blissfully, the moment drew near, during dinner.

Richie felt himself shoot anxious looks at Eddie, who shook his head that it wasn't time yet.

Once everyone had finished, Eddie had given a nod to Richie and stood up.

"Um, guys, I have something I want to tell you," Eddie announced, and the room stopped cold.

Richie grabbed Eddie's hand, which was out of sight, and gave it a

squeeze.

Bev interrupted the silence. “Okay, Eds, we’re listening,” she said, and the rest of the group nodded their agreement.

“Well…Richie and I are dating,” Eddie said.

Silence.

And then, very slowly, Stan turned to Mike.

“You owe me ten dollars.”